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2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Nigeria

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution bars the federal and state governments from adopting a state religion, prohibits religious discrimination, and provides for individuals' freedom to choose, practice, propagate, or change their religion. The constitution provides for states to establish courts based on sharia or customary (traditional) law in addition to common law civil courts, although civil courts have preeminence over all other courts. Sentences may be appealed from sharia and customary courts to civil courts. In addition to civil courts, sharia courts function in 12 northern states and the Federal Capital Territory, and customary courts in most of the 36 states.

In May, the Sultan of Sokoto and cochair of the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), Muhammadu Sa'ad Abubakar III, said the resurgence of insecurity and killings across the country was worrisome. The Sultan said NIREC would engage with the new government to find a solution to the insecurity. In a statement issued in September, Catholic bishops urged the state and national governments to stand up to their "primary responsibility of safeguarding the lives and property of Nigerians." The Christian-oriented research group Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa (ORFA) stated in an April report that both criminal gangs and terrorist organizations were increasingly attacking local communities, particularly Christian communities, leading to a climate of fear and displacement of populations, and the government in many cases failed to protect citizens against the attacks.

Media reported that military and police attacked members of the government-proscribed Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN) during an

Ashura procession in Abuja, with one person shot in the head and two individuals sustaining fractures in their legs. At year's end, Humanist Association of Nigeria President and former Muslim Mubarak Bala continued to serve a 24-year prison sentence for his conviction on charges that he had insulted Islam and Muslims with the intent to cause a breach of public peace. At year's end, the retrial of Muslim singer Yahaya Sharif-Aminu for insulting the Prophet Muhammad remained pending before the Supreme Court. In December, a judge released Rhoda Jatau, a Christian, on bail after 18 months in detention; her trial on blasphemy charges continued. In August, authorities detained Adegbola Abdulazeez, an Isese (Yoruba traditional religion) priest and activist based in Oyo State, for insulting the emir and other Muslim leaders in Kwara State. In response to a June fatal mob attack against an alleged blasphemer, the Sokoto State governor issued a statement urging individuals not to take the law into their own hands but also noting the government would "deal decisively with anyone found guilty of any act aimed at degrading the personality of Prophet Muhammad." Jewish groups reported discrimination over the government's lack of religious accommodation for their observance of the Sabbath on Saturdays. In September, the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Muslim Rights Concern (MURIC) said appointments since the President's inauguration in May had favored Christians at the expense of Muslims. Some Christians reported difficulty buying land to build churches in some northern cities but said delays and difficulties were not absolute and construction of churches was taking place. On March 8, during a webinar sponsored by Catholic organization Aid to the Church in Need, Archbishop Matthew Man-oso Ndagoso of Kaduna said Christians in northern states were unable to build churches or other Christian infrastructure because local officials did not issue construction permits. In April, the Federal High Court nullified some sections of The Companies and Allied Matters Act (CAMA). The court ruled it infringed on citizens' exercise of human rights, including "freedom of thought, conscience, and religion," as enumerated in the constitution. In August, after some family members threatened to kill a Muslim woman for converting to Christianity, a court in Plateau State ruled that she was free to change her religion and granted her protection from those threatening her.

According to the *Global Terrorism Index*, in 2023 the country experienced its first increase in deaths from terrorism in three years, with deaths from terrorism up 34 percent, to 524 persons. The report stated the higher death toll was principally due to a surge in the conflict between ISIS-WA and Boko Haram. Terrorist groups, including Boko Haram and ISIS-WA, continued to attack population centers and religious targets, including churches and mosques, and maintained an ability to stage forces in rural areas and launch attacks against civilian and military targets across the North East and elsewhere in the country, according to observers. In February, ORFA published a report on killings and abductions in the country; ORFA concluded that terror groups killed Christians

proportionately in much greater numbers than Muslims. The report, however, did not draw conclusions regarding whether Christians were targeted based on their religious identity. On September 15, the Catholic Bishops Conference said in a statement, "Insecurity has remained a persistent problem in our country as insurgents, herdsmen militia, bandits, and so-called 'unknown gunmen' have continued to unleash terror in different parts of the country." ISIS-WA efforts to implement shadow governance structures in large swaths of the region remained limited to the fringes of Lake Chad in the extreme North East, according to media reports. According to the *Global Terrorism Index*, ISIS-WA and Boko Haram remained the two deadliest terrorist groups in the country, together responsible for 427 deaths during the year. In October, a report released by Nigerian security risk management firm Beacon Consulting stated that suspected Boko Haram members killed more than 252 persons in Borno State by in August alone in addition to many killings in the preceding months.

Government security services, NGOs, media, academics, and other observers said the level of insecurity driven by rising criminality continued to worsen during the year. In September, a Catholic seminarian was burned to death when bandits attacked the residence of the chancellor of the Catholic Diocese of Kafanchan in the Zangon Kataf Local Government Area of Kaduna State. Bandits attacked a mosque in the Ikara Local Government Area of Kaduna State and killed seven worshippers in September. Numerous fatal clashes occurred throughout the year in the North Central Region between predominantly Christian farmers from various ethnic groups and predominantly Muslim herders. On December 24, armed gunmen launched coordinated attacks on more than 17 villages in Plateau State, killing more than 150 persons, mostly Christians, and injuring and displacing thousands of others. Between mid-April and early July, attackers reportedly killed more than 200 persons, most of them Christian, in the Mangu Local Administrative Area in Plateau State. The Church of the Brethren in Nigeria, EYN, also reported that Boko Haram and Fulani militias killed 18 persons in attacks during the Christmas season on four of their communities in Borno State. In March, Fulani herdsmen killed at least 60 Christians in Benue State, according to media outlets. Also in March, armed men killed 17 Christians in the Zangon Kataf Local Government Area of Kaduna State. According to media outlets, in September, Fulani herdsmen killed 10 Christians in Plateau State, where 27 others were slain in August. Some Christian leaders said they believed herdsmen's attacks were motivated by a desire to take over Christians' lands as desertification has made it difficult for them to sustain their herds, while others said that in many cases the attackers were bandit groups that disguised themselves as herdsmen. Fulani leaders said the killings were reprisals for earlier killings of Fulani herders. According to the NGO Open Doors, there were 4,118 Christians killed, 3,300 abducted, and 100,000 internally displaced in the country during the period October 2022 to September 2023. There were numerous kidnappings for ransom

involving members of clergy. According to Aid to the Church in Need, as of late November, 23 Catholic priests, sisters, and seminarians had been kidnapped during the year, and there were several killings as well. In June, a mob in Sokoto stoned to death a Muslim man accused of blaspheming Islam during an argument at a market. On September 1, gunmen killed at least seven persons at Friday prayers at a mosque in Saya village, Kaduna State. During morning prayers on October 24, bandits attacked another mosque in Kaduna, killing the imam and two other worshipers. Lawyers representing or considering representing individuals accused of blasphemy stated they were discreet about identifying themselves, given possible threats against them.

U.S. embassy and consulate general representatives and visiting U.S. government representatives raised religious freedom issues with government officials throughout the year, including the resolution of widely publicized blasphemy cases, the role of religious leaders in peacebuilding and enhancing social trust, and societal abuses affecting religion. The Ambassador and other embassy officials engaged with various religious groups, including the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the Society for the Support of Islam (JNI), the Islamic Society of Removal of Innovation and Reestablishment of the Sunna, and others throughout the year. The embassy supported efforts to address conflict among targeted at-risk communities by facilitating dialogue between aggrieved parties, promoting respect for religious freedom, and training community and religious leaders to peacefully resolve disputes. The embassy funded three activities that sought to strengthen engagement and reduce tensions related to farmer-herder and other conflicts in Borno, Adamawa, Yobe, Benue, Delta, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kogi, and Plateau States. The embassy continued to fund interfaith dialogue training for leaders in six North West and North Central states.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 231 million (midyear 2023). According to the Pew Research Center, as of 2015, the country is 50 percent Muslim and 48.1 percent Christian, while approximately 2 percent belong to other or no religious groups. Many individuals syncretize Indigenous animism or traditional practices with Islam or Christianity.

In its most recent detailed surveys in 2010 and 2012, Pew found 38 percent of Muslims self-identify as Sunni, most of whom belong to the Maliki school of jurisprudence, although a sizable minority follows the Shafi'i school of *fiqh*. This corresponds to the 37 percent of Muslims who identify either with Sufism, of which the largest brotherhoods are the Tijaniyyah (19 percent) and Qadriyyah (9 percent), or Salafism, known in the country as Izala. The same studies found 12 percent of Muslims self-identify as Shia, with the remainder declining to answer or identifying as

“something else” (5 percent) or “just a Muslim” (42 percent). There are also small numbers of Mouride Sufis, as well as Ahmadi and Kala Kato (Quraniyoon) Muslims.

According to a 2011 Pew Center report, Catholics comprise approximately 25 percent of Christians; Protestants and other Christians comprise approximately 75 percent. According to CAN, mainline Protestants, including Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, and others, together account for approximately 25 to 30 percent of the Christian population; Pentecostals, approximately 30 percent; evangelical Christians, including the Fellowship of Churches of Christ and Evangelical Church Winning All Fellowship, approximately 10 percent; and African-instituted churches, including the Christ Apostolic Church, the Cherubim and Seraphim Church, and other indigenous Aladura or “white garment” churches, 5 to 10 percent. There are numerous nondenominational churches and smaller Christian groups, such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, Rosicrucians, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Other groups include Baha’is, Hindus (including members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness), Sikhs, Buddhists, animists, and individuals who do not follow any religion.

There are Jewish communities in Abuja and Lagos led by the Chabad Lubavitch movement and comprised mostly of foreign residents. A larger community of Nigerian Jews – dividing themselves among Messianic, Sabbatarian, Community of Hashem, and Orthodox congregations – is present primarily in the South East and South South Regions of the country.

Islam is the dominant religion in the North West and North East Regions, although significant Christian populations reside there as well. Christians and Muslims reside in approximately equal numbers in the North Central Region. Christianity is the dominant religion in the South West, including Lagos, which is also home to significant Muslim populations.

In the South East Region, Christian groups, including Catholics, Anglicans, and Methodists, constitute the majority. In the South South, Christians form a substantial majority. There are small but growing numbers of Muslims in the South South and South East Regions.

Evangelical Christian denominations are growing rapidly in the North Central and South East, South South, and South West Regions. Ahmadi Muslims maintain a small presence in several cities, including Lagos and Abuja. The Shia Muslim presence is heavily concentrated in the North West Region.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution stipulates that neither the federal nor state governments shall establish a state religion and prohibits discrimination on religious grounds. It provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the freedom to change one's religion and to manifest and propagate religion "in worship, teaching, practice, and observance," provided these rights are consistent with the interests of defense, public safety, order, morality, or health and protecting the rights of others. The constitution also states it shall be the duty of the state to encourage interfaith marriages and to promote the formation of associations that cut across religious lines and promote "national integration." The constitution prohibits political parties that limit membership based on religion or have names that have a religious connotation.

Blasphemy, including insult to religion, is prohibited throughout the country in both the secular and sharia legal systems. According to the federal penal code, any person who carries out an act "which any class of persons consider as a public insult on their religion, with the intention that they should consider the act such an insult, and any person who does an unlawful act with the knowledge that any class of persons will consider it such an insult, is guilty of a misdemeanor" and may be subject to imprisonment for two years. The federal penal code does not define such acts as blasphemy. Intentionally insulting religion to cause offense is also a misdemeanor under subnational state criminal and penal codes, with penalties of imprisonment for two to five years and/or fines.

In the 12 states with sharia penal codes, which generally only apply to Muslims, insulting or incitement of contempt of any religion may incur sentences such as a fine, imprisonment, or both, and blasphemy by insulting, inciting, or showing public contempt for the Quran or any prophet recognized in Islam or by "damaging" or "disrespecting" the Quran, carries the death penalty. While some individuals have been sentenced to death for these crimes, the death penalty has not been enforced for such cases since sharia codes were first approved in public referenda in 1999.

Katsina and Kaduna States have laws requiring licenses for preachers, places of worship, and religious schools. In Katsina State, the law establishes a board with the authority to regulate Islamic schools, preachers, and mosques, including by issuing permits, suspending operations, and imprisoning or fining violators. The Katsina law stipulates a punishment of one to five years in prison, a fine of up to 500,000 naira (\$550), or both for operating without a license. In Kaduna State, the Interfaith Preaching Council issues permits to those who wish to preach in public and regulates against the use of foul, demeaning, or derogatory language against individuals or other religions based on recommendations from the local government interfaith committee.

Violators of the law are subject to fines and/or two to five years' imprisonment. Other states and local government areas establish their own modalities for licensing public preachers but do not license religious organizations.

The constitution provides for states to establish courts based on sharia or customary (traditional) law in addition to common law civil and criminal courts, although civil and criminal courts have preeminence over all other courts. Sentences may be appealed from sharia and customary courts to civil and criminal courts. Sharia courts function in 12 northern states and the Federal Capital Territory. Customary courts function in most of the 36 states. The nature of a case and the consent of the parties usually determine what type of court has jurisdiction. The constitution specifically recognizes sharia courts for noncriminal proceedings, but state laws do not compel participation in sharia courts in noncriminal cases. All citizens, regardless of faith, have the option to have their civil cases tried in secular or sharia courts. In addition to noncriminal matters, sharia courts also hear criminal cases if both the complainant and defendant are Muslim and agree to the venue. Zamfara State law makes it mandatory for all Muslims to utilize sharia courts in such cases, but not in noncriminal cases. In all states with sharia penal codes, criminal cases with possible sentences of death or life in prison may only be appealed from sharia to secular courts.

Sharia courts may pass sentences based on the sharia penal code, including for serious criminal offenses for which the Quran and Islamic law provide *hudud* punishments, such as caning, amputation, and stoning. Sharia penal code offenses and charges are only applicable to Muslims. Sharia courts operate under similar rules as common law courts, including requirements for *mens rea* (culpable mental state) and other due process considerations. According to the chief registrar of the Kano Sharia Court, by law, defendants have the right to legal representation in all cases, and certain high crimes require the testimonies of at least four witnesses. Defendants have the right to challenge sharia court decisions in common law appellate courts. The highest appellate court for sharia-based decisions is the sharia panel of the Supreme Court, staffed by common law judges who, while not required to have formal training in the sharia penal code, often do and may also seek advice from sharia experts.

In the states of Kano, Zamfara, Sokoto, and Yobe, legally established Hisbah Boards or commissions have a mandate to ensure public compliance of Muslims with sharia penal codes. Hisbah agents also attempt to resolve interpersonal and family disputes between Muslims in those states and work with police to enforce the respective states' sharia penal code. The states of Bauchi, Borno, Katsina, Kano, and Yobe maintain state-level Christian and Muslim religious affairs commissions, ministries, or bureaus with varying mandates and authorities, while many other state governors appoint interfaith special advisers on religious affairs.

The CAMA authorizes the federal government to intervene in the management of private entities, including religious ones, and gives it broad and discretionary powers to withdraw, cancel, or revoke the certificate of any business or association; suspend and remove trustees (and appoint any one of their choice to manage the organization “in the public interest”); take control of finances of any association; and merge two associations without the consent and approval of their members.

Federal and state governments have the authority to regulate mandatory religious instruction – known as Christian religious knowledge and Islamic religious knowledge – in public schools. The constitution prohibits schools from requiring students to receive religious instruction or to participate in or attend any religious ceremony or observance pertaining to any religion other than their own, or not approved by parent or guardian. Some state education laws also protect students’ rights to be excused from religious instruction entirely. State officials and religious leaders have stated that students have the right to request a teacher of their own religious beliefs if the school does not offer an appropriate Christian or Islamic religious knowledge course. The constitution also states that no religious community or denomination shall be prevented from providing religious instruction to students of that community in any place of education maintained wholly by that community. The law requires schools to admit and accommodate students of all faiths or no faith, regardless of the student’s or school’s religious affiliation. Christian state schools are required to allow Muslim students to wear a hijab. In Islamic state schools, the hijab is required of all female students, regardless of religion, as part of the uniform.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement

On May 19, the Sultan of Sokoto and cochair of NIREC, Muhammadu Sa’ad Abubakar III, decried the resurgence of insecurity across the country, describing the situation as worrisome. While condemning the killings, the Sultan said the country could not continue on the same trajectory, adding that NIREC would engage with the incoming government to find a solution to the insecurity. While the Sultan said that the killings were not related to religion but were the activities of “uninformed people,” Archbishop Daniel Okah, the general overseer of the Christ Holy Church International and also a NIREC cochair, at the same meeting pointed to the importance of improving the religious literacy of national leaders, including knowledge and respect for other religions.

On September 15, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference said in a statement that many of the country’s communities had been taken over by bandits.

According to the statement, “Escalating insecurity has remained a persistent problem in our country as insurgents, herdsmen militia, bandits, and so-called ‘unknown gunmen’ have continued to unleash terror in different parts of the country... The result is that many [persons] have fled their homes, abandoned their farms, shops, businesses and other sources of livelihood...” The statement also urged the state and national governments to stand up to their “primary responsibility of safeguarding the lives and property of Nigerians” and politicians to “eschew the politics of bitterness, divisiveness, and religious bigotry.”

A report published in April by Open Doors International and World Watch Research, which quoted ORFA’s February report, said that “terror groups” comprising both criminal gangs and terrorist organizations were increasingly attacking local communities, particularly Christian communities, leading to a climate of fear and displacement of populations, and the government in many cases failed to protect citizens against the attacks.

According to multiple news reports, on December 3, army drones attacked a religious gathering in Tudun Biri village in Kaduna State that was marking the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, killing at least 85 persons and possibly as many as 120. The army admitted responsibility for the airstrikes, stating the intended target was criminal gangs, and issued an apology. President Bola Tinubu ordered a thorough investigation into the attack, and his spokesman termed it a “bombing mishap” that was “very unfortunate, disturbing, and painful.” A statement issued by the JNI Secretary General, Khalid Abubakar-Aliyu, offered condolences and called on the government to ensure that those responsible for the incident be held accountable in accordance with the law. Archbishop Daniel Okoh, President of CAN, also issued a statement expressing deep condolences and appealing to the Armed Forces to prioritize the safety of civilians and ensure that proper precautions and measures be in place to avoid similar incidents in the future.

On December 5, the Yobe State High Court sentenced two dishonorably discharged soldiers to death and 10 years’ imprisonment, respectively, for their roles in killing Yobe State imam Sheikh Goni Aisami in 2022 after he offered them a ride, and they attempted to steal his vehicle.

On July 28, according to media reports citing IMN representatives, military and police opened fire on an IMN Ashura procession in Abuja. One person was shot in the head and two individuals sustained leg fractures. Police also reportedly shot teargas into the procession. Authorities arrested an unknown number of persons. As a proscribed group, the IMN was not able to apply for approval to conduct a procession.

At year’s end, Humanist Association of Nigeria President and former Muslim Mubarak Bala continued to serve a 24-year prison sentence after

pleading guilty in 2022 to 18 counts of making statements that insulted religion with the intent “to cause a breach of public peace.” After his sentencing, Bala’s attorneys filed an appeal, which remained pending before the court.

At year’s end, Muslim singer Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, imprisoned since 2020, remained incarcerated and under sentence of death after being convicted of insulting the Prophet Muhammad due to song lyrics deemed blasphemous; a decision whether to retry his case remained pending before the Supreme Court. The appeal cases of Muslim clerics Sheikh Abduljabbar Nasiru Kabara and Abdul Inyas on blasphemy charges remained pending before the Kano State High Court and the Kano Federal Court of Appeal at year’s end.

On December 8, Rhoda Jatau, a Christian nurse arrested in Bauchi State in 2022 and later charged with insulting religion with intent to breach public peace, was released on bail after 18 months in detention. Jatau reportedly shared WhatsApp messages critical of the 2022 mob killing of Deborah Samuel, who reportedly made a comment interpreted as disparaging religion. Some residents in Bauchi reportedly also viewed Jatau’s messages as blasphemous and called for her arrest or death. Mobs reportedly searched for Jatau to attack her over these messages and in the process attacked Christian properties in Bauchi.

In August, authorities detained Adegbola Abdulazeez, an Isese (Yoruba traditional religion) priest and activist based in Oyo State, for insulting the emir and other Muslim leaders based in Ilorin, the capital of Kwara State. According to his attorney, Abdulazeez was forced to renounce his belief in the Yoruba traditional spiritual system and pledge allegiance to the emirate in Ilorin as one of the preconditions of his release. Abdulazeez ran a Facebook page dubbed “Tani Olorun,” a medium through which he critiqued what he considered the hypocrisy of religious leaders who he said frequently denigrated traditional religious practices publicly while secretly patronizing traditional practitioners for physical and spiritual ailments. Another Muslim group accused Abdulazeez of burning a Quran. Abdulazeez, who continued to face a blasphemy charge, remained free on bail at year’s end.

In December, IMN members commemorated the eighth anniversary of the 2015 clash between the army and the IMN in Zaria in which 348 IMN members and one soldier were killed. There was no reported progress on establishing accountability for the killings.

According to several local NGOs, various early warning systems operating throughout the North Central and North West Regions prevented attacks. These systems capitalized on training local individuals to sense rising communal tension, including between religious communities, and report it to authorities before it could grow to violence.

Abuses Limiting Religious Belief and Expression

In response to the June 25 stoning to death by a mob in Sokoto of an individual who purportedly made a remark that was interpreted as a slur on the Prophet Muhammad, Sokoto State Governor Ahmed Aliyu issued a statement urging individuals not to take the law into their own hands. The statement also noted that “the present administration will not take the issue of blasphemy lightly and will deal decisively with anyone found guilty of any act aimed at degrading the personality of Prophet Muhammad.”

Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others

The government’s ban of the IMN as an illegal political organization remained in place, while other Shia groups continued their activities without hindrance, according to the Rassulul A’azam Foundation, the largest registered Shia religious organization in the country.

The Kano State Films and Censors Board, a government organization responsible for regulating music and film, continued to require poets and singers to obtain a license to perform all new material. In deciding on licenses, the board took into account the views of Kano’s Ulama Council, an informal gathering of respected Muslim clerics representing each of Kano’s various Muslim groups, to which the state government often defers on matters that could affect public peace. The Lagos State Films and Video Censors Board regulated cinematography and prohibited the production of films that it determined would undermine public order.

Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment

Jewish groups reported discrimination due to the government’s lack of religious accommodation for their observance of the Sabbath on Saturdays. They said this prevented members from taking state professional examinations that are given only on Saturdays. They also said they were disenfranchised because all elections are held on Saturdays. They further said that state or local sanitation days, which closed streets on Saturday mornings, often prevented their members from attending Shabbat services.

In September, MURIC called on President Tinubu to ensure that all regions and faiths be represented in political appointments made by his government. MURIC said that the appointments since the President’s inauguration in May had mainly favored Yorubas and Christians at the expense of Muslims. Executive Director Ishaq Akintola said, “We are shocked to our marrow that President Bola Ahmed Tinubu has been appointing Christians ... mainly to key positions since the inception of this administration at the expense of Muslims. For instance, five out of eight security chiefs appointed earlier are Christians. Ministerial posts have not been different.” MURIC also stated that the five seniormost positions in

the financial sector were held by Christians. As of year's end, there were 28 Muslims and 19 Christians in Tinubu's cabinet.

Sources, including Christian religious leaders, stated that while churches in northern states have faced difficulties in obtaining land for church buildings, they had been able to surmount obstacles and construct churches and construction of some churches was continuing. On March 8, during a webinar sponsored by Aid to the Church in Need, Catholic Archbishop Matthew Man-oso Ndagoso of Kaduna said Christians in northern states such as Kano, Sokoto, Katsina, and Zamfara, were unable to build churches or other Christian infrastructure. "So, in this part of our country, Christians aren't free to practice their faith as the Constitution demands, because if I am not free to build a church, if I am not free to get land, you cannot tell me that I am free," the Archbishop said.

In April, the Federal High Court Abuja nullified some sections of the CAMA that it considered infringed on citizens' exercise of their constitutional and human rights, including on the right to "freedom of thought, conscience, and religion" enshrined in the constitution as well as on freedom of peaceful assembly and association. CAN had earlier expressed concern that CAMA might allow the government to exert administrative control over smaller religious organizations organized as NGOs. Human rights lawyer Emmanuel Ekpenyong, who had challenged the law in court, expressed satisfaction with the Federal High Court's decision.

In July, Tabara State Governor Kefas Agbu facilitated a peace agreement between warring communities in Wurkun (a predominantly Christian community) and Karinjo (a predominantly Fulani/Muslim community).

President Tinubu issued several statements condemning religiously motivated violence. In December, following the killings of at least 150 persons during the Christmas period in three locations in Plateau State, President Tinubu said, "I strongly condemn the heinous and brutal attacks in Bokokos and Barkin-Ladi Local Government Areas, which have tragically resulted in the loss of many lives." In September, during celebrations commemorating the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, former vice president and 2023 presidential candidate Atiku Abubakar urged religious leaders to use their positions "to preach peace, tolerance, and unity."

Other Developments Affecting Religious Freedom

In August, a court in Plateau State ruled that an 18-year-old Christian convert was free to change her religion. The individual successfully secured protection from family members who threatened to kill her for converting from Islam.

In October, the government issued passports to IMN leader Sheikh Ibrahim El-Zakzaky and his wife, enabling him to travel to Iran to receive an honorary doctorate degree. In 2022, El-Zakzaky and his wife sued the

government for refusing to release their passports, citing the action as a violation of their exercise of their human rights and an infringement on their freedom of movement.

ACTIONS OF FOREIGN FORCES AND NONSTATE ACTORS

The military remained engaged in a more than a decade-long conflict against terrorist groups Boko Haram and ISIS-WA, both of which killed and kidnapped Muslims and Christians.

According to the *Global Terrorism Index*, total deaths from terrorism increased for the first time in three years to 524, up by 34 percent from 2022. The report noted that civilians were the targets in more than a quarter of the attacks, followed by military and law enforcement personnel, each the target of 21 percent of the attacks. Terrorist groups, including Boko Haram and ISIS-WA, continued to attack population centers and religious targets, including churches and mosques, and maintained an ability to stage forces in rural areas and launch attacks against civilian and military targets across the North East and elsewhere in the country, according to observers. ISIS-WA engaged in efforts to implement shadow governance structures in large swaths of the region according to media reports, but the reports indicated that the efforts remained limited to the fringes of Lake Chad in the extreme North East. According to the *Global Terrorism Index*, attacks by ISIS-WA accounted for 276 terrorism-related fatalities, followed by Boko Haram, responsible for 151 fatalities during the year. Many of the deaths occurred because of conflict between the two groups.

In February, ORFA, based in the Netherlands, published a report on killings and abductions in the country from October 2019 through September 2022, concluding that Christians were killed in proportionately much greater numbers than Muslims by entities the report designated as “terror groups.” In absolute numbers, the report stated that 12,793 Christians and 4,497 Muslims were killed in the three-year period covered by the report. The report, however, did not draw conclusions regarding whether Christians were deliberately targeted.

In October, a report released by Nigerian security risk management firm Beacon Consulting stated that suspected Boko Haram members killed more than 252 persons in Borno State by in August alone in addition to many killings in the preceding months. According to the *Global Terrorism Index*, Borno State experienced a 63 percent increase in terrorism-related deaths during the year.

At year’s end, Leah Sharibu, captured by ISIS-WA in 2018, remained a captive, reportedly because she refused to convert to Islam from Christianity.

According to media reports, on the ninth anniversary of the Boko Haram 2014 kidnapping of 276 mostly Christian pupils from the Chibok Government Girls Secondary School, 94 remained in captivity. In April, the military rescued two 26-year-old women from among the captives. At year's end, 87 of the girls reportedly remained captive.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to government security services, NGOs, media, academic, and other observers, the level of violence driven by rising criminality again continued to worsen during the year. Because issues of religion, ethnicity, land and resource competition, and criminality are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely, or even primarily, based on religious identity. As in previous years, numerous fatal clashes occurred throughout the year in the North Central Region between predominantly Christian farmers from various ethnic groups and predominantly Muslim herders. There were also incidents of violence involving predominantly Muslim herders and Christian or Muslim farmers in the North West Region. In addition, criminal groups continued to commit crimes of opportunity, including kidnapping for ransom, armed robbery, and banditry in the North West, North Central, and South East Regions. According to media reports, violent activity in these regions again increased in volume, geographic scope, and severity during the year, a continuation of previous years' trends. Media outlets reported multiple attacks by "bandits" or armed criminal gangs on religious sites, including mosques and churches. Multiple academic and media sources said banditry and ideologically neutral criminality, rather than religious differences, were the primary drivers of violence in the North West Region. Christian organizations continued to say clergy were often targeted as victims of these crimes, because they were viewed as soft targets who often traveled conspicuously without security in the evenings, were typically unarmed, had access to money, and generated significant media attention. While many religious groups, including the Catholic Church, formally refused to pay ransom, some communities raised money to ensure the return of their religious leaders. Family members of kidnapping victims also sometimes paid ransom.

According to Open Doors, there were 4,118 Christians killed, 3,300 abducted, and 100,000 internally displaced in the country during the period October 2022 to September 2023. This compares with 5,014 Christians Open Doors reported killed and 4,726 abducted between October 2021 and September 2022 and 4,650 Christians reported killed and 2,510 abducted between October 2020 and September 2021.

In March, armed men killed 17 Christians in the Zangon Kataf Local Government Area of Kaduna State.

In September, a Catholic seminarian was burned to death when bandits attacked the residence of the chancellor of the Catholic Diocese of Kafanchan in the Zangon Kataf Local Government Area of Kaduna State.

On September 1, gunmen killed at least seven persons at Friday prayers at a mosque in Saya village, Kaduna State. During morning prayers on October 24, bandits attacked another mosque in Kaduna, killing the imam and two other worshippers.

Numerous fatal intercommunal clashes continued throughout the year in the North Central Region between predominantly Christian farmers from various ethnic groups and predominantly Muslim herders. In March, Fulani herdsmen killed at least 60 Christians in Benue State, according to media outlets. In his Easter message, Archbishop Ignatius A. Kaigama of Abuja stated that "from Boko Haram to banditry and kidnapping, the threat of violence and terrorism, the stories are both heart-breaking and fear-inspiring just as the terrible events of Good Friday were over two thousand years ago." In April, herdsmen killed 33 Christians in Runji village in Kaduna State. A local government spokesperson said the attackers, "maimed and burned mostly women and children, set houses ablaze, and raided several houses within the community." Also in April, media outlets reported armed Fulani herdsmen killed 18 Christians and wounded a pastor in Plateau State. According to media reports, in September, Fulani herdsmen killed 10 Christians in Plateau State, where 27 others were slain in August.

Between mid-April and early July, attackers reportedly killed more than 200 persons, most of them Christian, in the Mangu Local Administrative Area in Plateau State. Joseph Gwankat, president of the Mwaghavul Development Association in Mangu, said 54 villages had been attacked, hundreds of persons were missing, and more than 18,000 were displaced. According to the *Vanguard* newspaper, the displaced were being housed in camps hosted by the Church of Christ in Nations.

On December 24, unknown armed gunmen launched coordinated attacks on more than 17 villages in Plateau State, burning houses, killing more than 150 persons, mostly Christians, and injuring and displacing thousands of others. Officials and some survivors blamed the killings on the farmer-herder crisis in Nigeria and ongoing competition over land and water resources, while others, including Christian religious leaders, stated that the Christmas killings were part of an organized effort to drive Christian farmers from their lands. The Chief Imam in Jos, the capital of Plateau State, said the killings were revenge for earlier killings of herders and theft of their cattle.

EYN reported that during the Christmas season, Boko Haram and Fulani militias carried out four attacks against EYN communities in Borno state. In Gatamarwa, the militias killed 10 persons and burned houses; in Pemi

three persons were killed, and a vehicle was burned and another stolen; in Kidlindila, two persons were killed and one hospitalized; and in Ntsaha, three persons were killed.

According to an April report in Christian news outlet *Morning Star News*, Christian leaders said they believed herdsmen attacks on Christian communities were “inspired by their desire to forcefully take over Christians’ lands and impose Islam as desertification has made it difficult for them to sustain their herds.” Other sources stated that in many cases the attackers were bandit groups disguising themselves as herdsmen.

There were killings as well as numerous kidnappings for ransom involving clergy. On June 7, Father Charles Onomhoale Igechi of the Catholic Archdiocese of Benin City was shot and killed upon returning from pastoral duties. Media outlets reported that Catholic priest Father Jude Kingsley was kidnapped on May 19 in Imo State. On September 17, Catholic priest Father Marcellinus Obioma Okide was kidnapped along with six other individuals by gunmen suspected to be herdsmen while traveling in the Udi Local Government Area of Enugu State. Father Okide was released four days later. According to a report by Aid to the Church in Need, as of November 13, there were 23 kidnappings of Catholic priests, sisters, and seminarians during the year, including one priest who had been previously kidnapped in 2019. The report also cited one death resulting from a kidnapping and three other killings.

According to numerous sources, societal attitudes regarding blasphemy, apostasy, and conversion prevented many individuals, especially in the northern part of the country, from openly professing beliefs that were contrary to societal norms without fear of retribution. In June, a mob in Sokoto stoned to death a Muslim man accused of blaspheming Islam during an argument at a market. In a video clip capturing part of the attack, the victim was seen flailing under blows from sticks and stones as children were encouraged to throw rocks. The April Open Doors report stated that, in the northern areas of the country, Christian converts from Islam often had to flee to other areas to avoid being in danger and that sharing their conversion with family members could present a serious risk.

Lawyers representing or considering representing individuals formally accused of intentionally insulting religion or blasphemy, stated they were discreet about identifying themselves out of fear of receiving threats that they stated had created a repressive environment for human rights defenders and stymied access to justice.

The Associated Press reported in October that atheists in the country said they had always been treated as second-class citizens, citing one individual in the north who said he believed if he publicly identified as an atheist, it would be “an automatic death sentence.” According to the

report, while the south remained relatively safe for nonbelievers, sources stated that threats and attacks worsened in the north since the 2020 arrest of Mubarak Bala for blasphemy.

Religious and other civil society leaders continued to promote interfaith activities throughout the year, including among Muslims, Christians, and minority belief communities. In December, NIREC hosted a meeting of national Muslim and Christian leaders in Abuja to discuss the challenges their communities faced and how to promote peaceful coexistence among them. In August, the Interfaith Dialogue for Peace, an initiative of the KAICIID Dialogue Center (an intergovernmental organization also known as the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue), launched an interfaith code of conduct providing guidance for religious leaders to uphold shared values and promote understanding and cooperation among the country's diverse religious communities.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy and consulate general representatives and visiting U.S. government representatives raised religious freedom issues with government officials throughout the year. Issues included the resolution of widely publicized blasphemy cases, the role of religious leaders in peacebuilding and social trust, and societal abuses affecting religion, such as intercommunal violence.

Embassy, consulate general, and visiting Washington-based officials continued to promote religious tolerance and interfaith relationship-building with a wide range of religious leaders and civil society organizations. The Ambassador and other embassy officials engaged with various religious groups, including CAN, JNI, the Islamic Society of Removal of Innovation and Reestablishment of the Sunna, and others throughout the year. In January, the Ambassador hosted a dinner for prominent Nigerian religious leaders to mark U.S. National Religious Freedom Day, during which the participants discussed the role of religious leaders in forging and maintaining interreligious harmony across their communities. In July, an embassy official appeared on an interfaith television program that had as its stated aim encouraging peace and coexistence through dialogue and reiterated the U.S. government's policy of promoting religious tolerance through education and dialogue. Interfaith discussions sought to identify areas of consensus and narrow the gap regarding different views on the main drivers of conflict in the country.

The embassy continued to fund peacebuilding programs in states experiencing intercommunal conflict, such as Katsina, Kaduna, and Plateau. The programs trained leaders from farming and herding communities, including religious leaders, to adopt mechanisms, such as early warning systems to alert law enforcement and other authorities

before communal attacks, to help resolve tensions before they become violent conflicts. "Peace ambassadors" from embassy-funded projects continued to work to bridge the gap between victims, traditional/religious leaders, and the security apparatus in Kaduna State.

The embassy supported efforts to address conflict among targeted, at-risk communities by facilitating dialogue between aggrieved parties, promoting respect for religious freedom, and training community and religious leaders to peacefully resolve disputes. The embassy funded three activities that sought to strengthen engagement and reduce tensions related to farmer-herder and other conflicts in Borno, Adamawa, Yobe, Benue, Delta, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kogi, and Plateau States.

The embassy also continued to fund interfaith dialogue training for leaders in six North West and North Central states.

The embassy and consulate general used social media to advocate religious freedom and tolerance. For example, they posted messages on social media about the interfaith-discussion television program featuring an embassy official and embassy and consulate general-hosted events that promoted interreligious dialogue, such as iftars during Ramadan and the dinner for prominent Nigerian religious leaders to mark U.S. National Religious Freedom Day.

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